

WOMB: THE ACKNOWLEDGED TOUCH STONE FOR ‘WOMANHOOD’ AS PORTRAYED IN BAPSI SIDHWA’S *THE PAKISTANI BRIDE*, KHUSHWANT SINGH’S *TRAIN TO PAKISTAN* AND OSHO’S *THE BOOK OF WOMAN*

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ABSTRACT

“One is not born but rather becomes a woman” – writes Simone de Beauvoir in her book, *The Second Sex*. The feminist writers defies the representation of women as weak, docile, innocent or seductive in the cultural texts such as cinema, music, painting, soap opera and literature. These cultural texts normalize the sub-ordinate position of women and helps patriarchy, in retaining the power structure. A woman is projected as an object of pleasure and her primary function as procreation. Women are trained to fit into these roles which are not natural, but social. The woman’s womb is reduced to the status of power sites. The existing inequalities are the constructions of the patriarchal society to maintain the hierarchy. Cultural institutions like religion, family, education and art, validates this representation. This re-assertion naturalizes the idea ‘biology is destiny’ and suffices the institutions in maintaining their positions. The three texts- *The Pakistani Bride*, *Train to Pakistan* and *The Book of Woman* authored by Sidhwa Singh and spiritual guru Osho respectively testifies how society constantly trains us to read and write from a man’s point of view. These three texts produced during different periods of history consciously or unconsciously reiterate the clichéd idea called ‘woman’. Though these writers take different subject positions they ultimately tie women to the stake called procreation

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INTRODUCTION

Generations of unhindered patriarchy has forced women to live behind the façade of being natural nurturers and child bearers. History enslaved women to her reproductive function and society restricted their contributions to a womb. According to Simone de Beauvoir, women are both treasured and reviled for her reproductive function. Even today a woman’s liberation is viewed as a threat to morality and the values constructed by patriarchy. Women are always judged from a materialistic and biological point of view. A ‘functional’ womb becomes the yardstick to certify a woman as a ‘woman’ in the patriarchal society. As De Beauvoir writes, in *The Second Sex*- ‘Woman? ...She is a womb, an ovary, she is a female: this word is enough to define her’ (41).

Adrienne Rich’s *Of Woman Born* published in 1976, draws motherhood and reproduction to the core of feminist scholarship. Since the beginning of women’s writings the idea of ‘motherhood’ has remained a central issue in feminist discourses. The patriarchal society in its attempts to maintain the gender hierarchy complicated the concept of motherhood by pushing it into a web of pre-determined role-plays. Such attempts decomposed the

biological meaning of motherhood into a social construct. Even in this twenty-first century women choose to become mothers because it contributes to their satisfaction as a 'complete woman'. In the man's view motherhood is an inevitable stage in the attainment of womanhood. This transformed 'motherhood' into an institution to retain women under male control. The three texts by Sidhwa Singh and Osho testify the failure of 'women empowerment missions' across the globe. It manifests the myth of 'empowered' women in a patriarchal society. These texts re-assert the position of women in a society as 'devi', diva or devil. While Sidhwa's work celebrate the 'honour' that rests in a woman's womb, Osho approves a womb that can conceive and Singh snubs a womb that conceives from rape. Thus, in these works the womb decides whether a woman should be adored or abhorred.

For decades rape has been used as a tool to police women's behavior and lives. A woman who safeguards the divinity of her womb is pedestal led as the 'ideal' woman by the patriarchy. Sexual violence, specifically rape or threat of rape gives men control over women. It becomes an effective form of torture both physically and mentally. Susan Brown miller in *Against Our Will: Men, Women and Rape* define rape from a woman's point of view. She states 'If a woman chooses not to have intercourse with a specific man and a man chooses to proceed against her will that is a criminal act of rape' (18). Rape is more often committed than murder to administer male superiority. It is said that all women (even those who are not victims of actual rape) fears the threat of rape and it is this fear that keeps a woman subordinated. The problem of gender inequality is rooted in the belief that a woman's body and her reproduction can be controlled by the religion and state. What adds to the malady of rape is that the society expects a woman to acquiesce completely when assaulted by men. If a woman ever retaliates against male violence then the society responds with shock. According to Brown miller 'Man's discovery that his genitalia could serve as the weapon to generate fear must rank as one of the most important discoveries of pre-historic times...' (15). A woman is vulnerable either to a 'forced rape' or a domesticated 'protective mating'. All women, Brown miller says, have a 'price tag' attached to their hymen and it was this price tag (an un-ruptured hymen) that decided the family's honour in a society.

Humankind propagates through motherhood, thus infertility in women is considered a 'flaw' and leaves her 'incomplete'. In fact any woman who deviates from such pre-determined patriarchal norms are considered rebellious. A woman who chooses to go childless or adopt a child, drifts away from the 'normal' to the 'strange'. A woman subjected to rape is tagged 'impure'. The patriarchal society celebrates a woman's ability to bear offspring and frowns upon a rape victim. Thus motherhood is not an individual experience but a social-role determined by society and rape is 'not merely individual acts of male violence but a system of male control of women' (Brown miller 21).

The world of literature often depicts and narrates women in terms of her relationship to men- father, lover, husband and son. The three texts, *The Pakistani Bride*, *Train to Pakistan* and *The Book of Woman* by Sidhwa, Singh and spiritual guru Osho respectively testifies how society, through cultural texts, trains us to read and write from a man's point of view. Though these three writers take different subject-positions they ultimately tie women to the stake called procreation and reduce women's womb to a 'site' of power and control. While Sidhwa's work is an outcry against the institution of marriage and marital rape in Pakistan, Singh's 'partition' novel ignores the identity, sexuality and rights of women and guru Osho vacillates between sexual freedom and 'issues' related to motherhood.

Bapsi Sidhwa's novel *The Pakistani Bride* acknowledges the subjugated position of women in the patriarchal Pakistani society. The protagonist, Zaitoon's life is paralleled to the story of the American girl, Carol. Though Carol is educated and Zaitoon illiterate both their destinies are decided by the men associated with them. All the three works are a

replica of the society. While Sidhwa's novel glorifies Zaitoon's father and her husband Sakhi as the epitome of power, Singh demotes his female characters to secondary positions and Osho considers motherhood as an 'art' which has to be learned.

The plot of Sidhwa's novel revolves around the silenced female characters- Zaitoon and Carol. Though Carol symbolizes the West and Zaitoon the East, their fate in Pakistan remains same. This is evident in the statement 'this girl (Zaitoon) had no more control over her destiny than a caged animal...perhaps neither had she (Carol)...' (136). The female characters of the novel are subjected to degradation and commodification. Sakhi warns Zaitoon –'You are my woman. I'll teach you to obey me!' (172-73). This statement of the novel reinforces a woman's status as a slave of her master. Here, Sidhwa depicts marriage as a transaction of body from father to husband. In this work marriage is no more than an institution, a social trade designed to manipulate women's role in society.

Sidhwa's work exemplifies how a woman should be in a patriarchal society. Zaitoon, the protagonist, describes her neighbors dwellings as 'gigantic womb; the fecund, fetid world of mothers and babies' (55). While the ventilated rooms were assigned to men, the dim inner rooms were allotted to women. These stifling rooms resembled 'domains given over to procreation' (56). When Zaitoon reaches puberty Miriam informs her 'We all bleed. It's to do with having babies and being a woman...' (54). Later Miriam chides Zaitoon for playing with boys. She justifies herself by stating 'You are now a woman. Don't play with boys and don't allow any man to touch you. This is why I wear a burqa...' (55). The novel is repeatedly interspersed with such statements which confines a woman's identity to puberty, procreation and motherhood. Though the novel is titled *The Pakistani Bride*, the titular character remains peripheral and the focus is on her adoptive father Qasim and barbarous husband Sakhi.

The novel evidently discriminates between a good and bad woman. Once when Zaitoon overhears a woman saying that a ten year old girl is pregnant she is awed and asks herself 'How can that be...She's not married: it's impossible!' (58). The concepts of virginity locate the prestige of a man in a woman's hymen or her womb. The men folk secure their 'manliness' by subjugating women and forbidding them contact with male strangers. Patriarchy postures marriage as the ultimate destiny of 'good' women. Any woman who chooses to remain single becomes the cynosure of stigma. Sidhwa's novel maintains an identical doctrine. She begins chapter ten with the statement 'Marriages were the high points in the life of the women' (88).

The term 'honour' is often used as a tool to justify the crimes against women. In *The Pakistani Bride*, Sidhwa defines a wife as the 'embodiment of a man's honour' (138). In this statement Sidhwa unconsciously re-affirms that, a community's honour depends on its female virtue. A woman's womb and vagina are expected to retain the 'purity' and 'sanctity' prescribed by the traditional honour codes. It becomes inevitable to murder a wrongdoer who has shattered the traditional values. The patriarchal society restores respect and uproots the disgrace by murdering the path breaker. When Zaitoon objects to marry the man of Qasim's choice, Qasim warns her 'I've given my word. On it depends my honour. It is dearer to me than life. If you besmirch it, I will kill you with my bare hands' (158). Throughout the novel Sidhwa repeatedly deploys the terms 'honour' and 'disgrace' signifying its relevance in the Pakistani society. When Zaitoon ran away from her brute husband, the entire clan set out to find her because 'The threatening disgrace hung like an acrid smell around them' (190).

Language reflects the unequal economic and political relations and real life power struggles between genders. Sidhwa, though a celebrated women's writer, the language deployed by her in *The Pakistani Bride* becomes an instrument

through which patriarchy finds expression. The 'phallogocentric' language views women either as a submissive angel or as a dangerous monster. Language privileges the masculine phallus. The novel not just awes the readers with the description of the majestic mountains and azure rivers but it also shocks us at the brutality that the protagonist endures as a woman. Sidhwa's protagonist, Zaitoon's escape from the clutches of the tribal men is transient. The permanent escape of a woman from the world of patriarchy is no more than the appearance of a mirage on the desert dunes. Author writes 'Hands spread-eagled, holding aloft the wings of her blanket, Zaitoon looked like a bird about to fly yet permanently grounded' (208).

Sidhwa and Khushwant Singh are writers from Pakistan and India respectively, the by-products of partition. Both the authors conspicuously paint their female characters in the bubble of troubles. Khushwant Singh's *Train to Pakistan*, set in the background of Indian partition has been celebrated as a historical novel ever since its publication in 1956. The repercussions of partition weighed heavy on men, women and children. Though Singh paints a vivid picture of the partition and riots that followed, the question is whether he has given due justice in depicting the sufferings of the two genders. While the novel re-affirms the man's status as the 'privileged', the role of women is constricted to acts of sex, seduction and procreation. In Singh's novel most female characters are portrayed as 'objects of fantasy' meant to satiate the erotic desires of men.

Indian partition and migration of 1947 became synonymous with rape and sexual abuse. It is estimated that around 83,000 women were abducted, abused and raped. Very often their genitals were mutilated and breasts scarred with slogans. With no other choice some women committed suicide so as to avoid rape or forced conversions. Singh depicts the atrocities committed against women during this period. He writes '...both sides killed. Both shot and stabbed and speared and clubbed. Both tortured. Both raped' (Singh 1). War, migration, partition and prisons fostered the concept of rape and genital abuse as means to declare power. Women became victims of such social vendettas during partitions and wars. Here it is not a matter of opportunity but war cultivates masculine violence. Thus rape forms a part of the male system of control of women where rape is not biology but a construct of patriarchy. In both these novels the 'honour' of the community resides in the womb of women. While Sidhwa's protagonist Zaitoon decides the tribesmen's honour, the Sikh and Muslim men of Singh's work settle scores by raping women of the opposite sect. Hence the womb becomes the haven of power.

Singh brilliantly fuses facts and fiction in his novel. However the female characters are ignorant about their identity and rights. While Singh names all his male characters, only one of the female characters has a name, Nooran, the rest are nameless. They are repeatedly referred to as 'young Devdasi girl', 'Jugga's mother' or 'Ram Lal's wife'. Singh establishes their identities with the names of the men associated with them. Both Nooran and the young devdasi girl are portrayed as objects of pleasure. Neither of these characters questions their inferior status nor demands amelioration in their social position. In fact they appear content with the identity granted to them by the patriarchal society.

The first major female character of the novel, Nooran is described through an array of words associated with her body- 'large gazelle eyes', 'little mango breasts', 'bells tinkling in her plaits', 'swish-swish of silk' etc. in fact Nooran's 'granted identity' becomes synonymous with her physical features. The gunman's remark, 'She must give Jugga a good time' (10) constricts a women's role to the acts of sex. The second major female character is the nameless, young devdasi girl. She was 'dark' with large 'magic eyes'. She wore a glistening diamond on one side of her flat nose and the 'silver sequins on her sari sparkled' (37). Once again the female character has no essence of her own but her essence is constructed by the author through his male characters. Nooran and the devdasi girl can be viewed as the symbolic representation of the womenfolk who have no choice but to succumb to the man's brute force.

Nooran's remark to Jugga 'You are just a peasant. Always wanting to sow your seed' becomes a universal statement (20). Here the 'peasant' symbolizes the universal man while the woman assumes the role of the 'land', always ready to receive the 'seeds'. Nooran's second and final appearance in the novel is as an accomplished woman who proves her identity as a 'true female' by bearing Jugga's child in her womb. She tells Jugga's mother 'Beybey, I have Jugga's child inside me'.

Singh's portrayal of Nooran as a pregnant woman bearing Jugga's progeny re-affirms the idea that women are made or born to be a mother, a device for procreation and nurture. The functionality of the womb becomes the yardstick of femininity in a woman. The two female characters are 'performers' rather than mere characters. They perform the role assigned to them by the male author. They perform not as women but as objects. They are not individuals but tools of a cultural text which reinforce women's status as a procreating machine.

While Sidhwa and Singh are celebrated novelists, Osho is an Indian mystic and a spiritual teacher who was defined by *The Sunday Times* in London as 'one of the 1000 makers of the twentieth century'. He was often quoted as the man who "liberated the minds of future generations from the shackles of religiosity and conformism". However Osho's attempt to elucidate about women's liberation and sexual freedom ultimately becomes an imitation of the patriarchal writings and is no different from Sidhwa's *The Pakistani Bride* or Singh's *Train to Pakistan*. The eighth chapter of Osho's *The Book of Woman* titled 'Motherhood' terribly fractures a woman's existence and confines her to the act of bearing and nurturing. In this chapter he answers four questions raised by his followers – responsibility of being a parent as a woman, how to best fulfill one's duty as a mother, the 'motherly' qualities of a woman and the birth of a mother. All these questions revert to the existing impressions about the women as a procreating device.

Mothering, when combined with patriarchy becomes an oppressive social mandate that regulates a woman's freedom. Rich in her book *Of Woman Born* states 'The patriarchal institution of motherhood is not the 'human condition' any more than rape, prostitution and slavery are' (33). According to Rich motherhood is an 'ideology', unlike the women's own experiences of mothering which is a source of power the male-defined 'motherhood' is a site of oppression. The psychoanalytic feminist theorist, Nancy Chodorow argues that being mother is not an innate instinct but a 'task'. Elizabeth Badinter recognizes women's portrayal as weak, docile and submissive as nothing more than cultural conditioning. In short the concept of motherhood is no more than an institution constructed by the patriarchal society over generations.

Feminist writings, since its onset has opposed the patriarchal society which constantly lauds the 'divine sacrifices' of a mother. Osho considers motherhood as one of the 'greatest responsibilities of the world' (106) and so as to discharge one's duty as a mother 'You will have to sacrifice much' (109). According to Osho a 'real mother' never complains of her motherly chores because she 'enjoys it' and is 'obliged to the child' (110). He further writes 'And, naturally, there will be sacrifices, but they have to be made...joyously. Only then it is a sacrifice! If you do it without joy, it is not sacrifice. Sacrifice comes from the word sacred' (116).

Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique* published in 1963 coined the term 'feminine mystique' to describe the societal assumption that women found fulfillment in marriage, housework and child rearing alone. Friedan noted that several women were unsatisfied with their role-play but had difficulty articulating their feelings. Osho defines motherly love as unconditional love where one forgets the 'self', where one loves someone for the sheer joy of loving. Answering about the birth of a mother the spiritual guru states that through the birth of a child an ordinary woman becomes a mother. According to the mystique any woman can give birth, but only a woman with 'great art' and 'great understanding' can

become a mother.

CONCLUSIONS

Years of ignorance has constricted a woman's identity to a womb. The gimmick seems unaltered in the above texts as well. Womb decides the fate of Sidhwa's protagonist. The female characters in Singh's novel merrily satiate their male counterpart's carnal desires. In the partition novel, life of Singh's female characters is effected by men's sexual needs but unaffected by partition. Lastly the guru who speaks about the sexual freedom of women outlines the qualities of a 'good' mother and defines it as an 'art' with great responsibility. In short all these three works tie women's identity to the stake called womb. The authors narrate their women characters as victims of rape, pregnant mothers or prostitutes (women who sell the sanctity of the womb). In this regard the act of rape is synonymous to motherhood. According to manifold studies female rape victims 'enjoy' the experience of rape. Likewise the society deems a woman to revel in 'motherhood'. Though such ideas are formulated and fashioned by the patriarchal society, it is never weighed as outlandish but the natural and normal. Regardless of a woman's choice, such roles are coercively thrust upon her. In short, these works fail to free women from the existing role-plays of patriarchal society but tightens the noose of femininity around them.

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